

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS (OF SELECT EXCERPTS) OF AHMAD ALI'S

TWILIGHT IN DELHI

Mr. Tariq Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English
University of Malakand, Pakistan

Ms. Islam Bibi

Lecturer Department of English
University of Malakand, Pakistan

&

Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English
AWKUM Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore and analyze the colonial rule of English in British-Indian sub-continent, their socio-political objectives and various predicaments faced by Muslim Community in British-India through signs and symbols of Ahmad Ali's Twilight in Delhi. Symbolic components are used by Ahmad Ali, quite vehemently and dexterously. His direct and indirect method of using symbology is a unique approach to convey the essence of his thought and feelings, which otherwise would have been difficult to be communicated and understood in simple language. For instance, Mir Nihal's family, cat versus pigeon, pigeon flying, dancing girls, city wall, kite flying, Mrs. Nihal blindness, lane, beggars, etc., speak louder for the colonial rule and its devastating effects upon the Muslim community. Close reading technique is used as a critical approach to analyze the select passages (of the text) in the backdrop of British colonial regime in Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Symbology; British Colonialist; Muslim/Islamic Community;

1.1. INTRODUCTION

“Twilight in Delhi” is immensely visual and graphically explicit in effects and impact. Through the robust signs and symbols, Ahmed Ali recreated a world, which is vivid, vibrant and intimate to the actual traditional setup of ancient Delhi. The very title (of the novel) reflects symbolism, granting meaning and message to the overall effect of the narrative. According to a Dictionary of Symbols, “Twilight is the half-light of evening or morning; a symbol of dichotomy, representing the dividing-line which at once joins and separates a pair of opposites”. It further adds, “Evening-light is associated with the west, symbolizing the location of death”

(Cirlot, 2001, p.355; Liungman, p. 350). The title is suggestive and evocative, twilight here means, the time of day immediately following sunset and it is followed by complete darkness. The solitary hero of the novel, is striving against a host of trials and tribulations, odds and sufferings, “lost and defeated” by the close of the novel. It’s the view point of the author and of the leading characters who admit the use of Symbolism, in the first place. Ahmad Ali inserted symbolism—consciously and unconsciously—in a unique way to present and project the quintessence of his thought and feelings. Darkness and despondence prevail towards the close of the novel—both literally and figuratively. The author himself reaffirms the degraded visual representation of the Delhi’s decline and its eventual demise at the hands of colonial masters—the Britishers. He comments that: “Like a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat” (Ali, 1983, p.5). Having said that, the appearance and prevalence of night followed by twilight, symbolizes the dilapidation of Delhi (the capital of Mughal Empire and the seat of throne for civilizations even before the advent of White

Mughals). Thereby, the downfall of Delhi (at the hands of English Empire) was a deathblow for the entire subcontinent.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the reasons of socio-political decline of the Muslim community and how the colonial masters recklessly neglected their colonial responsibilities?

1.2. METHODOLOGY

Close reading technique has been used to analyze the signs and symbols of the given novel, in the backdrop of English Colonial/Imperial rule and regime of the Indian Subcontinent, particularly the city of Delhi.

1.3. GLOOM AND DOOM SCENARIO THROUGH SYMBOLISM AND SYMBOLOGY

Psychologically, in state of repression, individuals withdraw consciousness from painful or frightening impulses in a way one might withdraw one's hand from a hot stove. Mir Nihal's premonitions infuse the reader with the ominous sense that very soon Delhi would plunge into the darkness of night—into gloom and doom scenario—and would vanish forever. A very gruesome picture of the city has been portrayed and one can encounter the idea that the past grandeur remains no more in the city. It seems that someone has made captive each and everything. As, in the sorrowful words of Ahmed Ali: *Night envelops the city, covering it like a blanket. In the dim starlight roofs and houses and by-lanes lie asleep, wrapped in a restless slumber, breathing heavily as the heat becomes oppressive or shoots through the body like pain. In the courtyards, on the roofs, in the by-lanes, on the roads, men sleep on bare beds, half naked, tired after the sore day's labour. A few still walk on the otherwise deserted roads, hand in hand, talking; and some have jasmine garlands in their*

hands. The smell from the flowers escapes, scents a few yards of air around them and dies smothered by the heat. Dogs go about sniffing the gutters in search of offal; and cats slink out of the narrow by-lanes, from under the planks jutting out of shops, and lick the earthen cups out from which men had drunk milk and thrown away (Ali, 1983, p.105).

The city has been turned into a living entity—personified and embodied. The appearance of “dogs” and “cats” searching for the leftover represents the city that is looted ruthlessly and left abandoned by the invaders. “Jasmines” without fragrance projects the city without grandeur that it had acquired over the centuries. Stragglers and worn-out folks of the city, moving aimlessly, reflect the loss of their interest in the city that is devoid of past glory, now. Significantly, the city becomes a living dead that does exist, but never breathes, virtually. All the above-said manifestations are redolent of the lost regal magnificence. “Mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, lies indifferent in the arms of sleep” (Ali, 1983, p. 3). The description depicts the mercilessly invaded and plundered city, that still stands in its place, however lifeless and, thus unable to express its dejection and disappointment. The pin drop silence at night and the dark garb worn by the city is a sufficient evidence of its doomed fate. “sleep” metaphorically stands for death that has permanently vanished the existence of the city: the city that used to be bustling with glory of scents and scenes (for centuries) is mourning its own death, now! *Twilight in Delhi* is a turbulence of poignant and pungent memory on the Acropolis, the upper fortified part of an ancient Greek City, Susan Sugarman records the experience of Sigmund Freud, when he arrived at Acropolis (Athens) and gazed at its surrounding, his surprising thought was: “So all this really does exist, just as we learned at school” (Susan, 2010, p.71). Thus, the analogy of two grand cities, that is, Acropolis and Delhi, is well juxtaposed for the readers. The ruins remind past and present of the cities, that once were full of life. Ahmad Ali, with the prowess

of his insightful and deep observation, and through vibrant and vivacious signs and symbols, presented a living city having put on the garb of death.

Bonamy Dobree (1959), too, extrapolates Ali's usage of imagery and symbols in the following words:

It releases us into a different and quite complete world. Mr. Ahmed Ali makes us hear and smell Delhi...hear the flutter of pigeons' wings, the cries of itinerant vendors, the calls to prayer, the howls of mourners, the chants of qawwals, smell jasmine and sewage, frying ghee and burning wood (Dobree, 1959, p. 50).

Depicting the picture of Delhi, Dobree transports the reader into the world of real and living city that was once a busy seat of bustling activities. All the citizens have their own contribution in making the city powerfully representative of a prosperous place for living. Also, E. M. Foster calls this description, "new and fascinating", in the times when the novel was published.

The account of the dilapidated city walls is delectably interpreted under the incursion of exotic aggression and the encroachment of the foreigners—relentlessly—and brutally. The demolition of the city walls becomes laden with symbolic significance: Seven Delhis have fallen—all built by Mughal rulers, and Mir Nihal is pained that an eighth Delhi is under construction, which will be the capital of not the Mughals but the British. But gone are the poets too and gone is its culture. Only the coils of the rope, when the rope itself has been burnt, remain, to remind us to past splendor. Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its boulevards and by-lanes. Under the tired and dim stars, the city looks deathly and dark (Ali, 1983, p.3-5).

The passage presents the ruined city in a manner that it has burnt down with all its pomposity and buried in soil, however, a new city seems to be built upon the remains of Delhi, but this time it will be owned by English empire, not the White Mughals. Thereby, it will be replaced by another culture and a new life style—the western culture that had always been alien to the natives. And that would seldom be accepted by the inmates of Delhi. All the images of the bygone city are conveyed through a bleak presentation of dark and lasting night that would only dawn with English empire and its heinous occidental designs.

An impressive and effective symbolism is viewed through imagination, as well; Munawar Iqbal, in a very exquisite manner, expounds the deathly and dark city's appearances, in words as: "Ali uses powerful imagery, almost like symbols, which paint the old Delhi in grey, overwhelmed by the 'heat and dust'. Bewailing in nostalgia, he expresses the loss of past glory, decay of the past culture and ideology" (Iqbal, 2009, p.78). Delhi, now, is the reminiscent of past glory and a dying symbol of rich culture that flourished over a passage of centuries. Rulers after ruler of the Indian subcontinent lavishly invested on the making of Delhi and setting it as a monumental city, rife of eastern socio-cultural heritage and richness. Thus, with all its glory and shine, it was the representative and emblematic city of the Indian subcontinent, that represented the whole region—its ideology, its geo-political importance, and its socio-cultural legacy.

Mir Nihal's family is a symbol of the Muslim community as true representative of their social-political norms and religio-cultural customs. The narrator exploits a symbol of an aged date-palm tree to wail over the past magnificence of Delhi. Once heavy with fruit and the bees flocked round it, descending to the ground in search of food. Birds came to and perched on its expansive boughs, and stray pigeons rested in them at night. Now it's boughs had withered, leaves seared and fallen, and its trunk ugly and dark, stood like a scare-crow in the

darkness of the night. No more did the birds flock over it, nor were the bees attracted to it... (Ali, 1983, p. 8-9).

Close reading of the excerpt conveys the meaning and message that city was full of fragrance, inviting all the seasonal birds and insects to feast on it. Humans, too, were attracted towards the splendor of the city, flocking to Delhi for acquiring the knowledge of civilizations that left their magnificent remains on the city. Hence, the city was the center of great learning for all those who were interested in equipping themselves with the knowledge of the true Indian subcontinent. Now, instead of humming bees and beautiful singing birds (the poets and artisans of Delhi), only ugly ravens are attracted to it.

The attacking of a cat on pigeon is the approach of how the imperial masters exterminated the lasting peace of Delhi. As he went upstairs to release his pigeons, he saw feather on the stairs and many more on the roof. When he looked inside the loft he found that there had been massacre. He had forgotten to close the door last night and the cats had found their opportunity (Ali, 1983).

Callousness of the “cats” and innocence of “pigeons” are suggestive of the Imperial Britishers and the native Indians, respectively. The intruders sneaked into the city insidiously and made it their permanent abode, abolishing the radiance of Delhi, which once stood proud as a monumental city. The use of the word, “massacre”, renders the massive loss and looting incurred by the city through the hands of Whites. As pointed out by Ahmed Ali that Mir Nihal had forgotten to close the door last night, also represents that the Indian themselves are responsible for inviting the foreign invasion. As they have “forgotten to close the door” means that they themselves were indulged in leisurely activities

and did not pay attention to the prime roles and responsibilities, that is, taking care of and supporting their families and children.

Kite-flying, in an ailing society with a tattering economy, is a symbol of an unproductive pastime. It lacks the spirit of creativity and progress. It stands for purposelessness: “A large section of the populace is so much obsessed with a passion for kite-flying that it seems to be the only aim of living on earth” (Iqbal, 2009, p.80). Such useless pastime activities of the natives led the society to be devoid of any productivity; and, thus their ignorance paved the way for the deterioration of the old pristine culture, which, they could not preserve due to their lethargic attitude. The same sterility and self-merriment as compared to the country’s development, attitude of people has been depicted symbolically through a habit of kite-flying. As Ali mentions in an ironic manner: The sky was full of kites, black kites and white kites, purple kites and blue. They were green and lemon colored, red and peacock blue and yellow, jade and vermilion, plain or of various patterns and in different colours, black against yellow, red against white, mauve alternating with green, pink with purple, striped or triangular, with moons on them or stars and wings and circles in different colours, forming such lovely and fantastic designs. There were small kites and big kites, flying low and kites that looked studded in the sky. They danced, and they capered, they dipped down or rose erect with the elegance of cobras. They whirled and wheeled and circled, chased each other or stood static in mid air. There was a riot of kites on the sky. (Ali, 1983, p.28)

Dancing girls stand symbolically for the decline of individual’s morality and gregarious moral standards of society, in general. Probably, this is one of the reasons for the foreign invaders to take their traditional responsibility of “The White Man’s Burden”—to civilize the uncouth colonized Indians (Kipling, 1899). While commenting over the moral degeneration of Delhi, Iqbal extrapolates: Developing clandestine relationship with the dancing girls and

visiting them at night to idle away time epitomizes the decline of higher moral standards of a society. Youth and age of Delhi were regular clients of the dancing girls. Asghar and Mir Nihal, the son and the father, would allay their grief by attending on Mushtari Bai and Babban Jan respectively (Iqbal, p.81).

The moral decadence as pointed out and epitomized by Iqbal, is another major reason of the fall of the city. Such morally devouring and declining activities done by both old and young typifies their addiction to them that, in turn, causes the city to meet its final doom. To emphasize the fact, such moral degeneration has caused even the greatest civilizations (in past) to tumble down headlong and, had never let them to rise again. The recurrent description of lane represents the socio-cultural turmoil and turbulence. Iqbal observes that: “Ali uses the locale of a lane in the city of Delhi to frame the lives of its inhabitants many of whom are victims of Imperial atrocities” (Iqbal, 2009, p.77). The empire has no other designs except to ransack the colony, economically and politically. In this connection, the story paints the dismal and murky description of the city in the following words of Ahmed Ali: The sky was overcast with dust, the roads deserted... In a gutter lay a dead pigeon, its neck bent to one side, its stiff, blue legs sticking up towards the heavens, the wings soaked in dirty water, and one of its eyes still open, was ugly and sickening (Ali, 1984, p.11-12).

Death, virtually, hovers over the city, that was once a living and lively city. It is not alone death that approaches the city, but also brings with it humiliation and denigration. The dead pigeon says it all.

Adding fuel to the fire while discussing the depressed and woeful picture of the city of Delhi, Iqbal remarks: Stray dogs and beggars are a conspicuous presence in that *Mohallah*. It represents the collapse of the colonial social order in which the rulers are indifferent to the

plight of the masses. Poverty, misery and breakdown of the society and a whole culture are underlined (Iqbal, p.77).

Ignorance of the rulers towards the general masses and their deliberate negligence causes dejection, economic debacle, and overall collapse of the societal fabric, that leads to social anarchy and cultural alienations. Besides, people are getting estranged from one another amid such chaos, thereby aggravating the situation to worst. Such disorderliness meets the imperial motives of the English rulers, because “divide and rule” was their imperial slogan; and, thus they were successful in that despite their numerical minority.

Juxtaposing the past with the present, Ahmad Ali, stunningly mentions: He [the beggar] looked mean and insignificant like a swarm of flies over a dirt heap or the skeleton of a dead cat. But his voice had sadness and pathos which spoke of the futility and transience of life. It came from far away on winter nights, bringing with it gloom and hopelessness. Never a sadder voice was heard from a man, and it still rings in the ears. Bahadur Shah’s poem that he sang brought back the memory of olden days when this land had not been shackled in its modern sorrows (Ali, 1983, p.12).

Motley-clad beggar’s gloomy voice is reminiscent of the past—the days of the last Mughal emperor—Bahadur Shah Zafar. Thus, the Indian subcontinent had once enjoyed its heydays, is now becoming a helpless captive at the hands of the cruel and clever English masters. Long wintry nights symbolize the unending gloom hovering over the region, creating further despondence as it grows darker. The sad and suppressed voice of the beggar epitomizes the collective consciousness of the colonized people, who are (now) unable to raise their voices except hapless screaming. The traumatically agonizing voice of the beggar echoes tales from the past, present and the prospective future.

1.4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From the ongoing discussion, it becomes clear like a broad-day-light that English imperial and colonial masters have done nothing except to obliterate and smash down the pristine Himalayan culture of subcontinent through their malevolent strategic and tactical designs—especially, for their politico-economic gains. Nevertheless, the part being played out by the native Indians in the shape of their attitudinal lethargy and moral deterioration led to their socio-political debacle can't be overemphasized. State of affairs depicted in *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmad Ali through the apparatus of symbology, are quite consequential and evocative. Use of symbols has redoubled the meaningfulness of the characters, plot, settings, and themes. Culture—both material and non-material—is impaired and blemished by the imposition of outlandish English culture, paving a vacuum of plight and precariousness. This brief discussion leads the reader to the hedge where he can evidently observe the headlong adversity of the age-long unobstructed culture and its followers—pitifully.

1.5. CONCLUSION

In *Twilight in Delhi*, Symbols/Symbology acts out as a stalwart literary technique to drive things home and to present: various crises confronting Muslim community in India due to loss of political and cultural power multiplied due to yet another tragedy of epic consequences, that is the partition of India and the way it was carried out by the British before their own “shameful flight” from their colonial responsibilities. Through the related motifs of Kite-flying, Pigeon-flying, Dancing girls, and poetry recitation, Ali has underlined the major theme of his novel, which is the socio-political decline of the Muslims of India (Iqbal, p.79).

The colonial setting, with strong political and critical concerns, makes *Twilight in Delhi* veritable and resilient postcolonial narrative that is comparable with Chinua Achebe's *Things*

Fall Apart. Just as in Achebe's novel, in *Twilight in Delhi*, too, 'things fall apart' as the center of Mughal Empire could not hold, and mere anarchy became the order of the day (Achebe, 1958).

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, M. I. (2009). *Post-independence/ Post- colonial Pakistani fiction in English: A Socio-political study*. Lahore: Vanguard.
- Ali, A. (1983). *Twilight in Delhi*. Karachi: Shahkar Publications.
- Chinua A. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. U.S.: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Cirlot, J.E. (2001). *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Dobree, B. (1959). *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century, 1700-1740*. U.S. Oxford University Press.
- Kipling, R. (1899). "The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899." *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).
- Liungman, G. Carl. (1994). *Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Sugarman, S. (2010). *Freud on the Psychology of Ordinary Mental Life*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tariq, R. (1991). *Ahmed Ali*. Lahore: Vanguard.